



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

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Emergency Team Recommends Earlier Pertussis Boosters for Students

Parents of fifth and sixth graders should consider getting their kids a booster shot against pertussis (whooping cough) a year or two earlier than officially recommended, a team of health officials and medical providers has concluded.

The local Health Emergency Advisory Team (HEAT) met Tuesday morning at the request of the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department to discuss the current outbreak of pertussis in Helena and consider actions that might help to curb it.

The HEAT team includes physicians and representatives of the hospital, schools, health-care clinics, and the health department. The team is co-chaired by Melanie Reynolds, county health officer, and Dr. Will Snider, medical director for the health department and physician with the Cooperative Health Center.

Nurses from the health department said they've investigated 47 cases of the highly contagious respiratory disease since the start of the outbreak Feb. 4 – more than six times the average number in an entire year. Current cases have involved people ranging from 2 to 54 years old, but about a quarter have occurred among 12-year-olds.

“We’re seeing the most cases in sixth graders,” said Karen Dobson, public health nurse supervisor at the health department. “Kids get pertussis boosters when they enter kindergarten and again when they enter seventh grade. It’s looking as though the protection from the earlier booster is starting to wane sooner than we’d hope.”

The team members agreed that getting students vaccinated at age 10 or 11 may help to curb the spread of pertussis in the community.

Members also expressed concern about the potential danger to infants in the community.

“For the basic middle school student, pertussis is a very annoying disease, but it can be extremely serious in infants and the elderly, too,” said Dr. Erin Keefe, a Helena pediatrician. “The best protection for infants is to immunize them, beginning at 2 months old.”

She also recommended that pregnant women and fathers-to-be get vaccinated during the second or third trimester of pregnancy, for their own protection and that of their newborn.

Other actions the team advised included:

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- Restricting infants and toddlers from entering schools where with pertussis cases.
- Working to speed results of pertussis tests to people to minimize the length of time they may need to stay home from school or work.
- Lowering the cost of pertussis testing until the outbreak subsides.
- Asking school nurses to work with the health department to monitor students who may have been exposed to pertussis.

Dobson noted that pertussis so far has been found in 10 Helena schools, including both high schools, both middle schools and several elementary schools.

Lewis and Clark County usually sees an average of about 7 pertussis cases a year, according to the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services.

More information about pertussis symptoms and treatment is available from your health-care provider or at www.cdc.gov/pertussis.

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